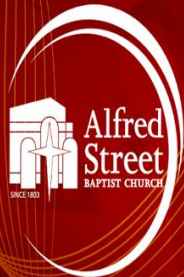


**PASTOR'S  
PICKS, IV**



SCAN FOR PHJW  
SERMON NOTES

# AT THE CROSS

SUNDAY,  
OCTOBER 8  
8AM & 11AM

**MARK 15:33-39**

**A SERMON BY  
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**Date:** October 8, 2023  
**Preacher:** Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley  
**Series Title:** **Pastor's Picks: Part 4**  
**Sermon Title:** *At the Cross*  
**Scripture:** **Mark 15:33-39 (NIV)**

*At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.  
And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"  
--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

*When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."  
One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now  
leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his  
last.*

*The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood  
there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of  
God!"*

#### **SERMON SUMMARY:**

In the fourth installment of the Pastor's Pick Sermon Series, Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley takes us to the cross of Calvary. Standing in the shoes of the Roman Centurion, we learn what changes the mind of this thoroughly indoctrinated servant of the Roman Empire to declare: "Surely this man was the Son of God!" As this leader of men and staunch protector of all things Roman stands and witnesses another execution of a troublemaker, something strikes him about Jesus that will not allow him to witness Jesus' death as just another day at work. Everything about his belief system, background, and allegiance to Rome shifts as the Centurion observes how Jesus dies. When this soldier identifies Jesus as the Son of God, he honors Jesus with the role of a divine person, placing his own standing in jeopardy because he is changed by what he sees and no longer aligns with the Roman authority.

What does he see? Pastor Wesley teaches us that the Centurion sees three things:

- the suffering of Jesus.
- the humanity of Jesus.
- the divinity of Jesus.

Pastor Wesley reminds us of the following as he expounds on what the Centurion sees:

**The Suffering of Jesus.** When, like the Centurion, we come close to the suffering of another, we *ought* to be changed. We should not be able to stand in the presence of suffering and remain unmoved. Pushing each person listening to the sermon, Pastor Wesley asks us to consider how our privilege allows or enables the suffering of another and how we are changed when we witness suffering.

**The Humanity of Jesus.** As the Centurion stands at the foot of the cross, he hears Jesus' cry out twice in a loud voice. That voice of pain and suffering causes the Centurion to see that Jesus is a man, just like he is. The Centurion realizes that as another human being, he and Jesus are more alike than different. Pastor uses this new understanding to challenge us to draw circles of commonality instead of lines of division between those we previously saw as "them." In fact, we are challenged to think about what we have in common with anyone we have called "them."

**The Divinity of Jesus.** Remembering that twice prior in the Gospel of Mark, God has named Jesus his son (Mark 1:11 and 9:7), when the Centurion identifies Jesus in the same way, we see the Centurion's belief align with God's declaration of Jesus' identity. Pastor Wesley challenges us to see the image of God, the *Imago Dei*, in all people. He asks us how we might treat people differently if we did not see color, gender, sexual orientation, or age as the defining characteristic of another person, but first, the image of God in them.

This sermon begins by telling us about the formation of Pastor's doctrine and beliefs. He acknowledges he shifted his position once he stood at the foot of the cross with the Centurion. Pastor Wesley did not shift his beliefs until he learned to see the suffering caused by his privilege, closed mind, and an unwillingness to see another person's humanity and divinity. We are challenged in this sermon to open and examine old beliefs in light of the teaching of the cross. May it be so with each of us, as we stand, with the Centurion at the foot of an old rugged cross.

#### **KEY POINTS:**

1. The Centurion's mind was changed concerning Jesus when he *saw* the suffering of Jesus, *heard* the humanity of Jesus, and *discerned* the divinity of Jesus
2. The Centurion was indoctrinated in the ways of Rome, much as Pastor Wesley was indoctrinated in the ways of Lilydale Progressive Missionary Baptist Church.
3. Religion can confound us when it encourages us to invest more in the certainties of God than in the mysteries of God.
4. We are not agents of God's wrath; we are messengers of God's mercy and grace modeling the transformative love of Christ to the world.
5. Our privilege can cause or come at the cost of another's suffering.
6. Seeing the suffering of others *ought* to shift something inside of you.
7. Seeing the humanity of others ought to bring us closer to that person.
8. When we see God in others that ought to help us honor and not demean them.

9. Pastor Wesley shows us that all people can change. The closer we come to the truth and the love of Jesus, exemplified today by coming close to the cross, the more we will be changed like the Centurion.

**PASTOR'S SLIDES (QR CODE):**

Please scan the QR code on the cover to gain access to this week's slides.

**GETTING TO KNOW YOU:**

10. As a child, Pastor Wesley's friends never spent the night on a Saturday. What are some of your favorite Saturday night activities, past and present?
  
11. Pastor Wesley shared that growing up, his family attended church every Sunday. What are some past or current norms or traditions of your family?

**INTO THE BIBLE QUESTIONS:**

12. Today's passages have parallel versions in the other synoptic gospels (Matthew 27:45-66; Mark 15:33-47; Luke 23:44-56). This link will share the parallel gospel passages. They are also included in the Resource section (see below). As you review the passages, what is the same, and what is different about the stories? What does the Mark text convey that is different from the other passages?
  
13. In Mark, the Centurion hears Jesus' cry with a loud and clear voice, not necessarily in terms of volume but in clarity. Similarly, to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:18), an earthly sense led to a divine revelation. Can you think of other instances in the Bible where a similar conversion happened to an opposer of Jesus Christ?

**LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS:**

14. The Centurion made a statement that could have cost him his life. Have you, or someone you know, ever been in a position where your beliefs could have cost you

something you held dear (e.g., a job, livelihood, relationship, family, faith)? How did you or your friend respond, and what did you learn from this experience?

15. Pastor Wesley suggests that we should draw circles of commonality instead of lines in the sand. What can you do to affect this change in your sphere of influence?
  
16. Consider a time when you were denigrated. How was your humanity denied? Conversely, how might you begin to think differently about someone you have denigrated? What would it look like to draw a circle of commonality instead of a line of division? And in the best possible scenario, what would be accomplished if you could bring the person you have denigrated “in” instead of casting them “out?”
  
17. When you begin to see others the way God sees them, Pastor Wesley says there should be a shift in you. How does the seeing and shifting expand your understanding of the *Imago Dei* (i.e., the image of God) in all people?
  
18. Think of a moment when the grace and the mercy of God saved you from yourself or the violence of others. How can you offer that same grace and mercy to your “them”? What does it cost you if you do not? What might it cost “them?”
  
19. Pastor quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter *from a Birmingham Jail*: "In a real sense, all life is interrelated... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be." How does this principle apply to our relationships (e.g., the church and the unsaved, parents and children, husbands and wives, teachers and students, co-workers and supervisors, pastors and their congregations, mentors and mentees)?

**“CAN I PUSH IT?” QUESTIONS:**



20. Pastor Wesley reminds us of that exposure to someone else's suffering *should* challenge our position. We are exposed to suffering in the streets of major cities and in the wars that punish countries worldwide. But we sanitize suffering by turning our televisions off or dismissing the pain as not ours. How could we draw close to the pain of those suffering (e.g., immigrants, those who are oppressed because of their sexual identity, those who are denied fundamental human rights, etc.)? And what does our faith in Jesus call us to do as "the church" and as individuals as we draw closer to this searing pain in our world?
21. Pastor Wesley speaks to how the church referred to Queer brothers and sisters with embarrassing language. ASBC embraces an ethic of inclusion for all people. Thinking back on your experience, what language did society once use to refer to groups we do not currently use? What shifts in faith, if any, are reflected in your current language choices?
22. How can we begin the process of uprooting **harmful interpretations** of passages from books like 1 Timothy, Leviticus 17, and Deuteronomy 21, 1 Corinthians 14:34, that have been used to perpetuate oppression within the Black church in particular and the wider society in general and promote greater inclusivity and understanding within our communities? (See books below.)

### ***FOR INDIVIDUAL OR VILLAGE STUDY***

#### **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:**

23. One of Pastor's mentors told him, "If it is new, it cannot be true." How has your image of God changed or stayed the same from what you held as a child? What practices of Christianity do you still uphold today, based on the doctrines you learned as a child? Did Pastor Wesley's sermon inspire you to re-evaluate those traditions?
24. Pastor Wesley tells us we are to be messengers of God's *mercy* and not agents of God's *wrath*. Have you ever been the recipient of someone pouring the wrath of God on you, or have you been that person? What was the outcome of that event? How might the experience have been transformed if the person/you had chosen to be an

agent of mercy?

## ACTIVITY

25. Micah 6:8 calls us to “...do justice, love kindness/mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” Which of these is hardest and why? Write a list of strengthening practices that you can put in place to accomplish this hard thing.
26. The title of this sermon is “At the Cross.” However, the prolific hymn writer Isaac Watts penned a hymn by this same title. The lyrics of all five verses are noted below. Please select the verse that challenges you the most and brings you closest to the suffering endured by our Savior on the cross. As you read these lyrics, write a list of what moves through your heart? In your own words, how would you come before the Savior with thanksgiving after reading this hymn?

1 Alas! and did my Savior bleed,  
and did my Sovereign die!  
Would he devote that sacred head  
for sinners such as I?

2 Was it for crimes that I have done,  
he groaned upon the tree?  
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!  
And love beyond degree!

3 Well might the sun in darkness hide,  
and shut its glories in,  
when God, the mighty maker, died  
for his own creature's sin.

4 Thus might I hide my blushing face  
while his dear cross appears;  
dissolve my heart in thankfulness,  
and melt mine eyes to tears.

5 But drops of tears can ne'er repay  
the debt of love I owe.  
Here, Lord, I give myself away;  
'tis all that I can do.

## SPIRIT WORK:

27. Take the 23rd Psalm and rewrite it using proper nouns and pronouns appropriate for someone with whom you are at enmity. For example:

*The Lord is John's shepherd. My brother John shall have no wants. The Lord makes John lie down beside green pastures and leads him beside still waters. He restores John's soul.*

After you finish writing out the Psalm with the name of the person with whom you are at odds, pray it each day during the week. Notice if it shifts how you feel about the person. Jot notes down in your Bible or your journal.

28. In this sermon, we hear the quote, "It is easier to invest in the certainty of God than to embrace the mystery of God." Please name something mysterious from the Bible that brings up tension between faith and doubt. In these moments, how are you able to maintain your faith? What does this show you about God?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

29. Μέγας φωνή:

- a. Pronunciation: Megas (Me - gas) Phone (Fo nay)
- b. Meaning: Great and clear

30. *Imago Dei*

- c. The image of God as seen in human beings. We are made in the image of God. We are made in the *Imago Dei*.

31. Christology

The branch of Christian theology relating to the person, nature, and role of Christ.

- d. Jesus is depicted in the gospels in various ways.
- e. In the Gospel of John he has a high Christology, meaning he appears to be more divine than human. See John 1:1-5, 16-18.
- f. In the Gospel of Mark, he has a low Christology, meaning he appears to be more human than divine. See Mark 6:5.
- g. However, in general Christians believe Jesus is both human and divine.

\*Synoptic Gospels, those gospels that see the life and ministry of Jesus in parallel are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John is not included in the synoptic gospels because its structure is very different. The parallels of today's passage are noted below. (syn= one, optic = eye. Synoptic means to see with one eye).

[http://bibletrack.org/notes/resource/KJV%20Text/050622\\_parallel-1.html](http://bibletrack.org/notes/resource/KJV%20Text/050622_parallel-1.html)



**Matthew 27:45** Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.

46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

47 Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias.

48 And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.

49 The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.

50 Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

**Mark 15:33** And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

35 And some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, Behold, he calleth Elias.

36 And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down.

37 And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost.

**Luke 23:44** And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

45 And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

46 And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

47 Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man.

48 And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned.

49 And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.

Books to read on Reimagining the Biblical Text:

